

Suu Kyi hails 'triumph of the people' in vote victory
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YANGON, April 3 — Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's party won a landslide in an election for vacant parliamentary seats, a victory she hailed yesterday as a "triumph of the people" after decades of military dictatorship.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) party won 40 of the 45 available seats in Sunday's poll, the Election Commission announced on state television, dealing a crushing blow to a ruling party created by the former military junta that kept her locked up for 15 years.

She fell short of giving the election the full-fledged endorsement that Western countries may be seeking before lifting sanctions imposed over the former military rulers' human rights record. But her criticism of the vote was restrained, and the European Union hinted it could lift some sanctions by the end of the month.

Aung San Suu Kyi addresses supporters from behind the gates of her National League for Democracy office in Yangon, April 2, 2012. — Reuters pic

The charismatic Suu Kyi, who led the opposition to military rule for two decades, will take a seat in the lower house.

"It is not so much our triumph as a triumph of the people, who have decided that they must be involved in the political process of this country," Suu Kyi told cheering supporters at the NLD's headquarters in Yangon.

"We hope that this will be the beginning of a new era, when there will be more emphasis on the role of the people in the everyday politics of our country. We hope that all other parties that took part in the elections will be in a position to cooperate with us to create a genuinely democratic atmosphere."

The contested seats account for only a small fraction of the 440-seat lower house and 224-seat senate, which both remain dominated by allies of the former military rulers.

But Suu Kyi, daughter of slain independence hero Aung San, will hold wide influence because of her huge popularity, until a full general election due in 2015.

The polls followed a year of astonishing change in a country that was under the grip of military rule for decades: the government has freed hundreds of political prisoners, held talks with ethnic minority rebels, relaxed media censorship, allowed trade unions and shown signs of pulling back from the economic and political orbit of giant neighbour China.

The EU hinted yesterday it could undo some sanctions — imposed over the past two decades in response to human rights abuses — by the end of this month. A lifting of EU and United States embargoes could unleash a wave of investment in the resource-rich country bordering India and China.

"We do expect the foreign ministers will recognise the changes and there will be a positive signal from the Council," EU foreign affairs spokeswoman Maja Kocijancic said in Brussels.

The NLD won 35 of 37 available seats in the lower house, three of six vacancies in the senate and both vacant seats in regional assemblies. The Election Commission did not announce the winners of the remaining five seats.

Sunday's polls were the NLD's first since 1990, when it trounced the military's proxy party in an election for a constitution-drafting assembly. The junta ignored the result.

Ruling party silenced

Yesterday, there was no reaction to the NLD's success from the ruling Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which will remain the biggest party in parliament. "Nothing to comment on," said one USDP official.

The NLD even won four seats in the capital, Naypyitaw, a new city built by the former junta and a stronghold of the USDP, the party of President Thein Sein and most of his ministers.

Suu Kyi, who was freed from house arrest in November 2010, agreed last November to end the NLD's boycott of a quasi-democratic system created and dominated by the same former generals who persecuted the pro-democracy camp.

That represented a giant leap of faith for Suu Kyi, who has found common ground with Thein Sein, a former junta heavyweight who has surprised the world with the most dramatic political reforms since the military took power in a 1962 coup.

Western governments are waiting for Suu Kyi's endorsement of the poll before they start reviewing sanctions. That was not forthcoming yesterday, although her criticism was restrained.

"We will point out all the irregularities that took place, not in any spirit of vengeance or anger, but because we do not think that these should be overlooked," she said.

Business executives, mostly from Asia but also from Europe and the United States, have swarmed into Yangon in recent months in search of investment opportunities in the country of 60 million people, one of the last frontier markets in Asia.

A small number of officials from Western countries and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were invited to attend the polls but were given only a few days to prepare.

ASEAN issued a statement yesterday saying it believed the election "was conducted in a free and fair and transparent manner" and urged the West to consider lifting sanctions.

Fresh approach

The last polls in 2010 were condemned as rigged to favour the USDP. The NLD boycotted that vote. But just as Myanmar is changing, so too is Suu Kyi. Many see her now, at 66, as more politically astute, more realistic and ready to compromise. She has described Thein Sein as honest and sincere and accepted his appeal for the NLD to take part.

But critics say Suu Kyi is being exploited by the old soldiers to persuade the West to end sanctions and make parliament appear effective. She plans to press for the introduction of

the rule of law, an end to ethnic conflicts and amendments to a 2008 constitution that ensures the military retains a big political role.

Some observers question whether conservatives would dare oppose her, given her popularity, especially ahead of the general election in 2015. There are also concerns that Burmese might have excessively high hopes of what she can achieve.

"Too many expectations are dangerous," said Ko Ko Gyi, a former political prisoner. "She is not a magician."

Win Min, a political scientist at Harvard University, said Suu Kyi would try to push reforms to raise living standards before tackling the contentious and taboo issue of trimming the military's political and economic stakes.

"She can be effective in galvanising the parliamentarians," he said. "She is likely to be more realistic in focusing more on making easier constitutional amendments."

Some US restrictions such as visa bans and asset freezes could be lifted quickly, diplomats say, while the European Union may end bans on investment in timber and mining. But some critics say they should wait for more reforms first.

"Now is not the time for the international community to rush toward lifting pressure on Burma," said US congressman Joe Crowley, who visited Myanmar in January. — Reuters

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